

Getting to the Roots of a Healthy Holiday

How Holiday Fruit and Vegetable Staples Came to Be

Celebrating bountiful harvests of fruits and vegetables with feasts of thanks is an age-old tradition. The ancient Greeks honored the goddess of grain at the festival of Thesmophoria each autumn, and the Romans honored the Goddess of Corn at the feast of Cerelia. Though the feast shared by the Pilgrims and the Wamapanoag Indians included very few fruits and vegetables, our feasts today are refocused on the healthful harvests. Thankfully, sweet potatoes, squash, cabbage, cranberries, and other favorites have come to be holiday staples as a result of the many people and the many traditions that influence America's cultural mosaic.

SQUASH/CORN

Squash are thought to have originated in northern Mexico, and the name comes from the Mattachusett Indian word meaning "eaten raw." Another favorite, corn, was grown for thousands of years before 1492, when Christopher Columbus saw it for the first time growing in the Caribbean. In fact, ears of corn have been found in caves in Mexico which date back to around 5000-6000 BC. Various types of corn were grown in an area stretching from Chile and Brazil to southern Canada for thousands of years. Corn, or ma-hiz ("maize"), was a major component of the diet of the Aztec, Mayan, Inca and south American Indians and formed part of the group of three staple plant foods (corn, beans and squash) eaten by the Native Americans who believed that they would not grow if not planted together.

SWEET POTATOES

Sweet potatoes have also been a favorite food for a long time. In fact, they have been around since prehistoric times, and some scientists believe that dinosaurs might have eaten these delicious vegetables. According to John Mariani, author of the *Encyclopedia of American Food and Drink*, the plant came to the southern part of the Americas in a roundabout way. Caribbean islanders, who called sweet potatoes "batata," introduced them to Christopher Columbus in 1492, who brought them back to Spain. Mariani believes that their popularity spread throughout Europe, and when Europeans came to North America, they brought the plant with them. But it was the slaves (not the European colonists) who subsisted on sweet potatoes. Slaves chose to grow the hardy root vegetable because they were given the roughest and toughest plots of land for their own cultivation. In fact, the word "yams" came from the African word "nyami" to refer to a sweet potato with a relatively moist texture and orange flesh.

CABBAGE

Cabbage, another favorite holiday food, was extremely important as a staple winter vegetable in cold climates when nothing else was available in many places in the world (England, Europe, the Mediterranean, and China). Chinese cabbage was recorded as early as the 5th century, but came to the USA late in the 19th century when thousands of Chinese men and women immigrated to America to help build the transcontinental railroad.

As different cultures came to the USA, they brought not only their crops, but also their cultivation and preparation techniques. Culturally, the result has been an American mosaic of peoples who form a diverse society of ideas, customs, and beliefs. Nutritionally, the result has been an array of delicious (and nutritious) fruit and vegetable dishes that we all incorporate into our holiday festivities and into our diets year-round.

This year, the National Cancer Institute's 5 A Day Program is "Getting to the Roots of a Healthy Eating." For recipes that include fruits and vegetables described in this article or for more information about nutrition and cancer prevention, please visit www.5aday.gov, or call Evelyn Schulman at NCI's Office of Cancer Communications at 301-496-6667.